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ABSTRACT

Practical difficulties in placing economics students and designing instructional materials in English as a Second Language at the University of Antwerp (Belgium), and techniques used for resolving these difficulties, are described. First-year students arrive with heterogeneous backgrounds because, unlike in other European countries, there is no state secondary school-leaving examination. The first hurdle, therefore, is proper placement in homogeneous groupings, according to experience and abilities. To address the needs of the least proficient group, the school has compiled reading texts and exercises that students complete at their own pace with instructional assistance. Each unit is based on a reading and contains a vocabulary, common errors, grammar, language practice, and comprehension section, the order and length varying according to the reading. Students are expected to look up vocabulary definitions. The common errors section focuses on false cognates and deceptively similar sentence patterns. In the grammar section, the students' attention is drawn to points of grammar in the context of the reading. The language practice section tests assimilation and application of grammar rules, and in the comprehension section, students must express their personal views on a particular issue in a 10-line passage. (MSE)

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On Compiling a Coursebook in Business English for Undergraduate Students in the Faculty of Economics

by Diana Phillips

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Paper presented at the Annual Eastern Michigan University Conference on Languages and Communication for World Business and the Professions (10th, Ypsilanti, MI, April 3-5, 1991).

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ON COMPILING A COURSEBOOK IN BUSINESS ENGLISH FOR UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN THE FACULTY OF ECONOMICS

First of all I must confess that when I started work on this paper I realized that there was so much I wanted to say that I would need much longer than the allotted 15 minutes. As I had to cut out rather drastically much of what I had intended to include, the title I originally gave to my paper no longer quite filled the bill. I have therefore changed it, and for this I apologize. I have decided not to deal with every aspect of compiling a coursebook for students of Business English, but to describe how we have solved the practical difficulties with which we have been confronted because of the ever-growing number of students in the faculty of Economics, a phenomenon not peculiar to the university of Antwerp.

We have some 400 students in the first year, about 200 in the second, 150 in the third and 120 in the fourth year. I must point out in parentheses that the reason for the high failure rate at the end of the first year at university is the fact that in Belgium there is neither a national school leaving certificate nor a university entrance examination. The significance of this I shall deal with in a moment. The students have to take at least two foreign languages in the first three years of their degree course, although most of them take three, namely English, French and German. They can, moreover, also enrol for two optional language courses, namely Spanish and Russian. Each language course takes up 60 hours per year in the first two years and 30 hours per year in the third year. This is roughly the equivalent of two hours a week for each language, so the majority of students will do 6 hours of languages per week in the first two years of their degree course in Economics. You may think this is rather a lot, but within a European and international context this is certainly

time well spent for future economists. To narrow the focus of my paper even more, I shall concentrate on the coursebook for our first-year students.

The main problem with which we are faced every year is that our first-year students have fairly heterogeneous educational backgrounds, as there is no state examination when they leave secondary school. France has its Baccalauréat, Great Britain its A-levels, Germany its Abitur, to name only the best known. In Belgium, on the other hand, it is each individual school itself which sets its school-leaving examinations and which awards secondary school diplomas. This means that there are quite significant differences between our first-year students, not only with regard to their academic abilities as such, but also their abilities, for example, to work on projects without the help or supervision of a teacher, to make summaries, to express themselves accurately both in the spoken and written language and so on. The first thing, therefore, that we do each year is to assess each student individually in the first six or seven weeks. They are given a sort of informal interview in which we ask them to tell us about, for example, their secondary school experiences, their holidays, their hobbies, or their goals in life, so as to enable us to assess their spoken English. On the basis of this interview they are divided into fairly homogeneous groups of about 15 for the practicals, which take place every two weeks. In theory we have half an hour a week, but we feel it is more sensible to have 1 hour every two weeks instead. The other one and a half hours a week are devoted to the theoretical course, which all 400 students attend together. The staff of the English department consists of one full-time professor, who teaches the theoretical courses, and one full-time lecturer and one half-time assistant, who are responsible for the practicals.

I should like to take a closer look now at what we do in the practicals in the first year. As I have already said, we divide the students into fairly homogenous groups of about 15. There are three levels, A, B, and C. The students in the A groups are almost near-native, those in the B groups are upper intermediate. The students in the C groups are those for whom we foresee serious problems, either because English just does not come naturally to them, in which case they will unfortunately always continue to have problems, or because their English is not yet up to the required standard. The reasons for this are manifold; perhaps they had fewer periods of English at secondary school, perhaps they never worked with audio and videocassettes in class, perhaps the working language in the English lessons was Dutch rather than English, perhaps their teachers were not very stimulating or not competent enough, and so on. It is relatively easy to teach the A and B groups, but within the C groups the students' problems are so diverse that it is very difficult to compile a coursebook tailored to the needs of each individual student. Moreover, at the end of the year all students, whether they were in A, B, or C groups, have to sit the same examination, which consists of a written paper and an oral examination, so much more ground has to be covered with the C groups, even though these happen to be the less able students.

In an attempt to overcome this problem we decided to compile a coursebook with reading texts and exercises, which the students would have to go through in their own time and at their own pace. These texts and exercises would then be dealt with in the practicals, not from A to Z, but rather by means of the question and answer method. In other words, in the practicals the students can bring up any problems they have experienced while preparing their work. When the various

problems have been dealt with in this way, my colleague and I check whether the students have been able to do the other exercises, namely those about which they have not raised any questions in the first half of the practical. With the A and B groups, this generally goes fairly quickly, so that the students can spend the remaining time discussing the content of the reading texts. This is one of the reasons why we insist on keeping the groups very small; we want all of the students in the group to be able to express their views and we feel this is only possible if they are used to working and discussing together and feel comfortable with each other. It would be impossible to have a lively and spontaneous exchange of ideas if there were, say, 50 students in each group. Whereas the students in the A and B groups will thus spend a considerable amount of time improving their command of the spoken language besides working on grammatical difficulties, writing short reports, translating or summarizing short passages etc, the C groups will, at least in the first year, concentrate almost exclusively on grammar, and on expanding their usually fairly limited vocabulary.

I have brought copies of one of the "units" in the coursebook so as to give you an idea of the kind of work the students have to do in their own time before they come to the practicals (*Unit 8: In for the Long Haul*). As you can see, the unit starts with a reading text of about 1½ pages, based in this particular case on an article in *The Economist*. Each unit consists of

1. a vocabulary section
2. a common errors section
3. a grammar section
4. a language practice section
5. a comprehension section

The order in which these sections appear in the units varies and, depending on what the reading text offers with regard to vocabulary, grammar and common errors, the sections will also vary in length : some texts may be excellent from the point of view of vocabulary acquisition, but less interesting as to grammar, and so on. You will also see that we have decided against writing a conventional textbook, and have opted for a combination of "textbook" and "workbook" instead. In the vocabulary section, for example, we have decided against giving the translations or explanations of the new words ourselves; instead we expect the students to look up the new words in their dictionaries. This method has the advantage that the students will actually acquire the habit of checking things in dictionaries and reference books, which are not, for many first-year students, the obvious tools to which they would spontaneously resort. The words on which we focus in this vocabulary section are words that we do not expect to be part of the average first-year student's active vocabulary. Needless to say, there will be quite a few other words in the reading texts that the students in the C groups above all will not know yet, and we therefore stress in the course of the first practical that we expect the students to look up all other unfamiliar words in the texts as well, the principle being that any word used in any section of the textbook, will be considered to be known by the students.

In the common errors section we concentrate on so-called false friends, i.e. sentence patterns, expressions and so on which also occur in the student's own mother-tongue, but in a different form (e.g. Unit 8: Engl. to be immune to = Dutch immuun voor; Engl. eventually ≠ Dutch eventueel, which expresses eventuality, whereas in English "eventually" expresses time; Engl. aggressive = Dutch agressief).

In the grammar section we draw the students' attention to particular grammar points, which they study in greater detail and more systematically in the plenary sessions, but which are considered here within a context. The grammar points we highlight in the textbook are thus, as it were, concrete applications of general rules the students have already studied before. The language practice section tests whether the students have assimilated the grammatical rules they have learned and can now correctly apply them in examples in a particular language context. Exercise 4.1. in Unit 8, for example, is an exercise on the use of the tenses but is, at the same time, a vocabulary exercise on the use of prepositions. In the first two exercises in the language practice section the students only need to fill in a particular form of a given verb or noun, but in 4.3 and 4.4. they have to apply their theoretical knowledge of grammar to a very particular combination of words in a much less guided way than in the preceding exercises, and translate short passages from and into their own mother tongue.

Finally, in the comprehension section they have to be able to convey their own views about a fairly complex issue in English.

Whereas we do deal with the vocabulary, common errors, grammar and language practice sections during the practicals as we had intended, and on the whole this works well, we nevertheless realized from the beginning that it would be difficult to go through the comprehension sections in class, as here the students have to argue their personal views on a particular issue in a 10-line passage, which will be very different from the passages written by the other members of the group. At first we asked the students to type out their comprehension

exercises and to discuss them with the group, using the overhead projector. Although it worked well and the students learned a great deal from correcting each other's mistakes and improving on each other's texts, this took up so much time that we had to abandon the idea. What we do now is to ask the students to hand in their coursebooks after they have done four units so that my colleague and I can correct the comprehension sections on an individual basis. Needless to say, this is very time-consuming and we are trying to find alternative methods of correction. Any suggestions would be most appreciated. At the end of the year the students have to take both a written examination, which deals mainly with the theoretical course, and an oral examination of about 10 minutes, in which they will be examined individually on the material in the coursebook. We also compare their performance at the oral examination with their performance at the interview in the beginning of the year. If there is a marked improvement, this will be reflected in the student's final mark, even though from a purely objective point of view, he/she may not yet have reached the required standard. The motivation behind this is that we look upon the English course as one course taught over a period of three years, rather than as 3 separate consecutive courses of one year each.

I am afraid that if I am to keep to the allotted time span I shall have to stop here, but I will be happy to reply to any questions you might have on the subject of this paper.

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